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DOE FOR CAROLYN GAY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/15/2018  
TAGS: PREL PGOV ASEC NI  
SUBJECT: HENRY OKAH: NOT DEAD YET?

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b & d).

¶1. (S//NF) SUMMARY: Speculation over the welfare and whereabouts of Niger Delta militant leader Henry Okah has run rampant after a February 19 fax to a news agency claiming to come from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) alleging that had Okah died in a Kaduna military hospital following a botched interrogation. The GON publicly announced that Henry Okah was both alive and safe; privately, however, for most of February 20, GON contacts gave Embassy officers confused, contradictory statements as to whether or not he was in good health. Finally during the evening of February 20th the Embassy received private confirmation from a reliable government source that Henry Okah remains in GON custody and is indeed safe and sound. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In a February 19 statement faxed to a news agency, alleged MEND leader "Jomo Gbomo" claimed that Okah had been returned to Nigeria from Angola, where he had been held in custody for alleged arms trafficking. The press release further claimed Okah had died that day in GON custody in the course of interrogation under torture. Later statements further specified that he was shot in the abdomen by GON security agents in an accidental discharge and taken to a military hospital in Kaduna where he died. "Gbomo" alleged Okah's death was part of a conspiracy created by foreign oil firms. (Note: "Gbomo"'s actual identity and position within MEND remain unconfirmed; many observers believe that, at least until his capture, this was a pseudonym for Okah himself, and some now think Okah's wife Azuka was the author of the February 19 fax to the press; however, at least some media sources we understand treat "Gbomo" as a legitimate MEND spokesman. End Note.)

¶3. (S//NF) The initial responses to inquiries, even from those well-placed within the Nigerian security establishment, ranged from denials that Okah was even being held to admission that he was either dead or comatose. The evening of February 20th finally brought confirmation from a reliable embassy contact in the Security Services that he was both in custody and unharmed, but noted that there were no plans to confirm Okah's presence to the public. This official's claims are buttressed by the coincidental presence of several Emboffs at the Kaduna military hospital on February 19 and 20, who reported no unusual security presence there and the appearance of business as usual.

¶4. (S//NF) COMMENT: Some of the various factions claiming to be MEND have proved adept at using the media to get out their message, and we believe these allegations of Okah's torture and death may have been a somewhat transparent attempt to get the GON to confirm Okah's whereabouts and condition. The GON's uncoordinated responses likely stem not only from its usual disorganization but from the fact that, after six months of Okah's detention in Angola, the government still may not have firm plans for how to proceed now that Okah is in its custody. END COMMENT.

SANDERS